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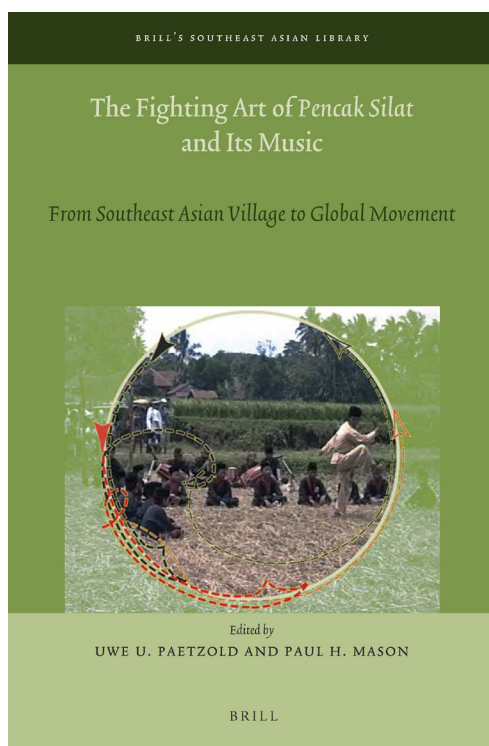
BOOK REVIEW

The Fighting Art of *Pencak Silat* and Its Music: From Southeast Asian Village to Global Movement

Uwe U. Paetzold and Paul H. Mason (editors)

Brill, 2016

376 pages £142



The word ‘interdisciplinary’ gets thrown around a lot in academia these days. Boundaries between fields of study are increasingly porous and it is not unusual for scholars to deploy theories or methods drawn from several different disciplines. In fact, Paul Bowman [2015] has suggested that the emerging field of martial arts studies is well positioned to further disrupt disciplinary boundaries thanks to the multiplicity of approaches being taken – or that could be taken – to its heterogeneous object of study. It is still somewhat rare, however, to find interdisciplinary work dealing closely with music while still remaining intelligible to scholars outside of (ethno)musicology. *The Fighting Art of Pencak Silat and Its Music* [2016] is a fine example of how martial arts studies can encompass musical (and choreographic) considerations alongside issues of culture, society, religion, ritual, media, politics, nationalism, identity, gender, and embodiment.

Uwe Paetzold and Paul Mason’s edited book arose out of productive interactions at the 2010 meeting of the International Council for Traditional Music (ICTM) held in Singapore. During that conference, the inaugural symposium of the ICTM Study Group on The Performing Arts of Southeast Asia was held, and pencak silat received both ethnomusicological and ethnochoreological attention from the participants of several panels. Studies of martial arts have until recently been under-represented in music and dance scholarship, perhaps because violent behaviour appeared to fall outside the purview of research on practices that are more often concerned with aesthetics and social cohesion.

Pencak silat can be thought of as what Clifford Geertz famously referred to as a ‘blurred genre’ [Geertz 1983] and which the editors discuss briefly in the Introduction. Precedent for theorizing music and martial arts in this way was set with studies of the Afro-Brazilian dance-fight-game capoeira [Lewis 1992; Downey 2002, 2005], to which I would like to add my own research on percussion music and lion dance in Chinese kung fu [McGuire 2010, 2015]. Like these other types of musical martial arts, interdisciplinarity in pencak silat results in a field of practice where it is advisable not to separate the constituent parts, but rather to deal with them as a single whole. Music, dance, drama, costuming, performance, and ritual are not independent from the fighting skills of pencak silat – they form an integral part of it. Granted, pencak silat is a blanket term of relatively recent vintage that seeks to encompass a wide and idiosyncratic range of practices, so not all local versions and variants contain every possible aspect in equal concentration, but proceeding with the idea of a blurred genre in mind is still useful.

A basic premise of the book is that, ‘when distilled into performance arts, activities correlated with fighting, self-defence, and physical aggression are able to offer highly meaningful anthropological insights

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into cultural life' that may not be available elsewhere [Paetzold and Mason 2016: 1]. This position ties into a key concept for research in the broad area of music and martial arts that Phillip Zarrilli might call *heroic display ethos*. He defines it as, 'that collective set of behaviors, expected actions, and principles or codes of conduct that ideally guide and are displayed by a hero' [Zarrilli 2010: 606]. Viewed from this perspective, a full range of martial art genres – broadly considered – from dance and dramatized combat to fighting sports and even organized warfare can be productively analyzed for their performative qualities.

This book is not self-identified as martial arts studies per se, but it does show an awareness of some of the relevant concerns. In the Introduction, Paetzold and Mason provide a definition of 'martial arts', which is considered alongside related terms like 'fighting arts' and 'self-defence arts'. It should be noted, however, that the rest of the authors do not appear to be as invested in that discussion. It is unfortunate that the editors' discussion does not engage with recent work on definitions from martial arts studies [e.g., Wetzler 2015]. Nonetheless, they make some useful contributions to martial arts studies discourse, particularly regarding aspects that are sometimes overlooked, like music:

As for music, when it comes to performing in public, it can be said to be one important aspect, or component, to differentiate a 'self-defence related art' – as manifested in some form of choreography, dance, or theatre – from a sheer self-defence art in the closer motoric functioning sense of a 'Form-Follows-Function' concept. Music is an important modality to bring pencak silat into the public arena, and to make it a movement art in everyday life. These are some of the assumptions from which this book starts.

[Paetzold and Mason 2016: 6]

Paetzold and Mason use David Jones' [2002] list of possible characteristics for martial arts but further this schema by adding two characteristics of their own. They also provide an Index of Terms and Associative Expressions at the end of the book that helps to organize the chapters by providing page references under section headings according to Jones' expanded model. The classification schema introduced in Jones' *Combat, Ritual, and Performance: Anthropology of the Martial Arts* should be familiar to most readers of this journal, so I will simply list Jones' categories for convenient reference along with his caveat that not all boxes need to be checked in order for a practice to be called a martial art: 1) Kata, 2) Emphasis on shock combat, 3) Ritual, 4) Techniques, repetition, and drill, 5) Sparring, 6) Entertainment, 7) Seeking internal power, 8) Ranking and indication of rank, 9) Connection with social elites. The editors' additions to Jones' schema are: 10) Medium for education and 11) Medium for movement therapy. The former educational aspect applies from large-scale government initiatives through to boots-on-the-ground work with street youth wherever martial arts are used as a means to inculcate social competence as well as control aggression. The latter movement therapy category refers to the holistic wellness benefits of some types of martial arts practice, which might be exemplified by taijiquan.

One of the greatest strengths of this book is its broad-yet-deep approach, which is unlikely to have been possible as a single, double, or even triple-author monograph. The twelve contributors combine approaches from ethnomusicology, ethnochoreology, anthropology, and performance studies. They cover nearly the whole 'world of silat', including Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei Darussalam, southern Thailand, and overseas transplants. In the root Indonesian-Malay culture areas, there are further differentiations by region belying the Java-centric nationalist discourses that threaten to construct pencak silat as a monolithic practice. The four parts of the book each contain several chapters. They cover 1) the general origins, history, development, and standardization of pencak silat; 2) specific case studies of local silat forms and their musics; 3) examinations of dances, rituals, and dramas that draw on or arise from pencak silat; 4) and considerations of

insider/outsider experiences and approaches to silat's embodied logic. The chapters in the third section cover movement arts like *luambek*, *rudat*, and *jaipongan*, which stretches the blurred genre concept as they sometimes only reference fighting skills in very stylized ways. These studies of silat-esque dances and dramas demonstrate how the martial arts aspects can be foregrounded in work on practices that might seem to be one step removed from fighting arts.

A thread running through various chapters is the way that pencak silat and its music are imbricated with discourses of identity, gender, power, and society (among others) that can be analyzed through careful attention to the details of performance. All the authors touch on sound and movement in their texts, but the representational methods they use in relation to these discussions are divergent. Some use Western staff notation for music, which presents a barrier for readers not familiar with that system, but also allows a degree of precision that is difficult to match in regard to pitch, rhythm, and duration. Other authors use graphical representations of music that are more intuitive to the uninitiated. Similarly, several authors use (or adapt) the language of Laban Movement Analysis to precisely describe and interpret the physical action they discuss, without necessarily getting into the symbols of Labanotation. One of the most inclusive approaches was that of Zahara Kamal and Indija Mahjoeddin, who represent sound and movement in an integrated choreomusical analysis, which strikes me as important when dealing with a blurred genre. In an appendix to their chapter, they provide a text-based table with three columns (movement, time, and music) that helps to make explicit the structures of sound and physical action that they analyze in relation to social organization.

The Fighting Art of Pencak Silat and Its Music would be a valuable resource for people with interests in martial arts as a blurred genre, as well as in the general topic area of Southeast Asian performing arts. It has been difficult to do this book justice in such a short review, particularly because I have dwelt on issues of theory and method rather than delving into the rich ethnographic, historical, cultural, social, musical, choreographic, and, of course, martial detail. In terms of critique, I am afraid that the steep price of the tome will scare some people away, although I hear that institutions who purchase the equally expensive access to an online e-book version will also be able to order much more affordable paperback 'MyBook' editions for their members. It is also unfortunate that the publisher could not (would not?) host a website for audiovisual supplements, and so the editors have taken on this task themselves. Their password-protected media site has its gate unlocked by a code available in the book. It is a work in progress, but the video is particularly helpful for those unfamiliar with silat and its music. Integration of audiovisual material with the text, however, is rather awkward. The authors were unable to refer to the supplementary website in their chapters because it was not available before publishing time, thus leaving readers to comb through the companion website to look for retrofitted examples. Minor faults aside, though, I heartily recommend this book.

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